

Culture Clash

U.S. ARMY COMBAT READINESS CENTER

The Soldier had been a company commander for nearly four months. A National Guardsman called to active duty, he was preparing for drill that weekend. His job was to oversee training given newly enlisted Guardsmen to prepare them for basic training or advanced individual training. It was well into summer and he decided to leave work early that Friday afternoon.

The Soldier and his wife enjoyed riding their new Harley-Davidson. The weather that Friday was perfect, and they got on the bike and headed out about 6 p.m. to visit friends in town. A short while later, the couple met up with a riding buddy and rode to a downtown bar where they spent nearly two hours drinking.

A little before 10 p.m., the Soldier and his buddy rode to another bar; the Soldier's wife stayed behind. The Soldier left the second bar around midnight to pick her up on his way home. However, he got confused as he attempted to retrace the route back to the first bar. Instead of turning onto the street where the bar was located, he turned onto another unfamiliar road.

A pedestrian walking south along this street heard the Soldier's motorcycle approaching from behind. Just ahead was a rise where some old train tracks had been smoothed over with concrete and, on the far side, a steep downgrade that led to an "L" intersection. A 90-degree left turn warning sign, accompanied by a suggested 10-mph sign, alerted motorists to the intersection ahead.

But in the Soldier's mind there wasn't any intersection. Rolling on the throttle, he accelerated to more than 60 mph as he roared down the road. The pedestrian watched the motorcycle pass, crest the rise and go airborne, flying 66 feet before it landed on the road. Although the Soldier hit both brakes upon landing, the motorcycle plowed into a chain-link gate at a construction site and ripped a 20-foot section of fence from its hinges. The Soldier and motorcycle became entangled in the fence and tumbled end-over-end more than a dozen times.

The pedestrian ran to the crash site and pulled the motorcycle off the Soldier's legs. For several minutes he tried to get a response from the Soldier, who seemed to be choking as blood ran from his mouth and ears. The man then ran to a nearby city jail where he told the desk sergeant about the accident and asked him to call 911. However, in his excitement, the pedestrian failed to provide the accident location before leaving and running back to the crash site. The sergeant called 911 at 12:15 a.m. but, without knowing the Soldier's location, couldn't give directions to emergency personnel.

In the meantime, another rider stopped to try to help the Soldier. Seeing the man running back toward the accident, the rider got on his bike and told him he was going for help. After checking the Soldier and seeing he still wasn't breathing, the pedestrian ran back to the street and tried to flag down several cars. He finally got a driver to stop and call 911 from his cell phone. Now that they had the accident location, local police and fire department personnel were on the scene within four minutes and, shortly afterward, an ambulance arrived. By then it was too late; the Soldier was already dead.

What killed this Soldier?

No helmet: The coroner examining the Soldier found three open skull fractures. These fatal injuries might have been prevented had the Soldier worn a helmet as required by Army Regulation 385-55 and the National Guard's policy on motorcycle safety. The Soldier had previously completed the Motorcycle Safety Foundation's Basic *RiderCourse* and knew why helmets are important.

Impaired by alcohol: According to eyewitnesses, the Soldier drank heavily that night. Toxicology tests revealed the Soldier's blood alcohol concentration was .28. Most adults would be unconscious at that level.

Lost situational awareness: Being drunk, the Soldier was confused about where he was and took a wrong turn. He also failed to notice the caution sign warning of the dangerous intersection.

Speed kills: The motorcycle was traveling about 63 mph when it crested the rise at the old train crossing. This excessive speed kept the Soldier from stopping before hitting the chain-link gate and increased the severity of his head injuries.



Why did he die?

Why did this Soldier choose to be reckless? You can't blame it on alcohol because he was sober when he chose not to wear his helmet and go drinking and riding. The root problem was less what he did than why he did those things.

On duty, this Soldier was an excellent performer. He'd served with distinction in Iraq and was called to active duty at his current assignment because of his proven abilities. He supported motorcycle safety at work by providing classes for other Soldiers. However, safety was neatly compartmentalized into his on-duty time. When he shed his uniform, he also shed the military regulations under which he served. The Army calls such a choice "indiscipline." In the end, it was indiscipline that set in motion the tragic events of that night.

Culture counts

Inside every organization is a culture that defines what's important. Vacant additional duty safety officer and NCO slots, nonexistent safety programs and ignorance of Army safety policies defined the safety culture of this Soldier's organization. And there were other troubling symptoms. Another rider in the unit hadn't taken MSF training, wasn't licensed to ride her motorcycle and refused to wear a helmet. She said she'd buy private insurance if the Army were to start finding riders who weren't wearing their required personal protective equipment not in the line of duty.

These type attitudes don't just happen in a vacuum; they're a reflection of the unit's safety culture. They also demonstrate why culture counts when it comes to the safety of individual Soldiers. How? When organizations adopt a culture of indifference, Soldiers adopt a culture of indiscipline.

Laying Down the Law

On Oct. 2, 2006, LTG Clyde Vaughn, Director, Army National Guard, addressed the issue of motorcycle safety in a memorandum sent to the adjutant generals of each ARNG organization. In the memorandum he said:

"Motorcycle accidents are occurring at alarming rates. Safety reports identify reckless driving, horseplay while excessively speeding, driving under the influence, loss of control and colliding with other vehicles. To date, the United States Army sustained a total of 47 casualties due to motorcycle accidents. That is 47 Soldiers no longer able to stand alongside you and answer the call to duty.

"... This unacceptable trend toward death and injury requires leadership intervention. ARNG personnel need motorcycle training and education. It is hereby required ... for all personnel operating a motorcycle to complete the Motorcycle Safety Foundation Course.

"... ARNG personnel, regardless of duty status, are required to wear personal protective equipment when operating a motorcycle—even when not required by state law. This is a requirement and a responsibility of your service to the military and the people of the United States. Furthermore, all ARNG personnel, regardless of duty status, must comply with DODI requirements for motorcycle safety.

"... Rider PPE includes: Department of Transportation approved helmet, face shield or impact goggles properly attached to the helmet, sturdy over-the-ankle footwear, long sleeved shirt or jacket, long pants, full fingered gloves or mittens designed for motorcycles and a brightly colored outer garment/vest/riding jacket (day)/retro reflective upper garment (night).

"... We are an organization committed to the safety of our personnel. We represent a Nation that expects and deserves our very best. Even while on a motorcycle, we should exemplify nothing short of loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity and personal courage. Remember, everywhere you ride you represent this country and this institution. The Army National Guard is always ready, always there and safety is therefore non-negotiable."

